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Kathy Lyday-Lee  
*University of Tennessee*

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**Will Allen Dromgoole:  
Forgotten Pioneer of Tennessee Mountain Fiction  
Kathy Lyday-Lee  
The University of Tennessee**

The mountaineer in the rough ... is a jewel. He has some strong and splendid characteristics. He is honest, he is the soul of hospitality, he hates a lie, he will "pay back" an injury if it takes till the day of his death to do it. He takes every man at his word ... he takes him at his true value, and then treats him accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation is a perceptive view of the Tennessee mountaineer as seen through the eyes and experience of Will Allen Dromgoole. A versatile and popular author during the 1890's and early 1900's, Dromgoole was a native Tennessean who wrote novels, short stories, poems, and edited a weekly column entitled "Song and Story" in the *Nashville Banner* from approximately 1904 until her death in 1934. Evidence of this column appears earlier than 1904 but on sporadic basis. Dromgoole's literature revolves around her mountain experiences, with the settings unmistakably derived from a knowledge of Tennessee. She has written a group of short stories that deals exclusively with the Tennessee mountaineer, an integral, oft misrepresented element of Tennessee society. Though much of her work is over-romanticized and contains excessive sentimentality, these portrayals of the mountaineer deserve to be praised for their accuracy in both characterization and speech patterns.

Dromgoole is, of course, only one of the many Tennessee authors who used the mountaineer as a stock character in their stories, but for some unexplained reason her works have received less acclaim than that of her contemporaries, such as Mary Noailles Murfree and George Washington Harris, both of whom achieved national recognition. This lack of notoriety results from several causes, among them being perhaps a serious lack of exposure, because of her works not being promoted nationally. Many of Dromgoole's stories appeared in the Boston magazine, the *Arena*; in fact, some of her stories have never been printed anywhere except in this periodical. The *Arena*, although relatively popular in the North, did not enjoy widespread popularity in the South. During the late nineteenth century, book publishers were being deluged with local color/regional literature; some, like Murfree's and Harris's, exhibited good quality and appeared early in the flood, but most of this literature was mediocre to poor quality. Dromgoole followed in these authors' footsteps, perhaps becoming lost in the crowd, thus explaining her lack of recognition. In addition, Dromgoole wrote only nine stories dealing with the mountaineer, which is far less than Murfree's extensive collection of moun-

tain literature. Although Dromgoole has been largely forgotten, her works were popular in the 1890's in Tennessee, and Dromgoole enjoyed renewed popularity in 1920's and 30's because of her weekly column in the *Banner*. Other than mountain literature, Dromgoole's work consists of stories of Nashville's people, especially the blacks and the poor. These tales tend to be overly sentimental, of mediocre quality, and not nearly as well written, as convincing, or as interesting as her mountain stories.

After discovering the nine "mountain" stories which are dispersed through two anthologies and three magazines, it seems necessary in the interest of Tennessee literature to praise Dromgoole's accurate portraits of the mountaineer, which capture the essence of the rugged men and women of the mountains.<sup>2</sup> In her attempts at realism, some of her characters are stereotyped; by *stereotyped*, I mean that characters are often flat and unoriginal, lifeless imitations of a real person. During this literary period, people had conceptions of how a mountaineer looked and acted, even though they had probably never seen or met one. Usually their descriptions were unflattering. For example, mountain men were described as being lean and lanky, dirty, ill-mannered, lazy, illiterate, drunk a good deal of the time, wary of strangers, and mean to their women. Some of these qualities were characteristic of some mountain men; however, the pictures of the mountaineers given to us by such experts as Horace Kephart (*Our Southern Highlanders*, 1913), Levi Powell (*Who Are These Mountain People?*, 1966), and Jack Weller (*Yesterday's People*, 1965) dispelled these generalities. The women, on the other hand, were of two types: they were either meek, wan, submissive, overworked with too many children; or they were hard, toughened by many years of back-breaking work, and were sometimes the presiding force in the family. It must be stressed that people cannot be placed into preconceived categories; individuality certainly existed in the mountains as much as in any other culture. When authors resort to using stereotyped characters, it is usually to subordinate characterization to theme, and Dromgoole is as guilty of this as any other writer during this period. She does not, however, make an overt habit of it.

Although Dromgoole is not well-known in the field of mountain fiction, the superiority of her work ranks her with the best, and in measuring her worth an examination of some of her contemporaries and their status as mountain authors will be useful. George Washing-

ton Harris, creator of the *Sut Lovingood Yarns* (1867), is considered one of the best presenters of the mountaineer, even though his main purpose was not to draw attention to mountain culture as much as it was to focus on political and social ideas. Sut Lovingood is a composite figure, made up of many features of the mountaineer but is not a realistic representation of a mountain man because of Harris's exaggerations. Harris's dialect also presents problems to the reader because of its inconsistencies and difficult spellings. Unlike Murfree and Dromgoole, Harris focuses on one main character instead of emphasizing a mountain society filled with various sorts of people. Mary Noailles Murfree is the undisputed spokesperson for mountain culture in the late nineteenth century, perhaps more for the quantity of her work rather than the quality; Dromgoole, however, had more contact with the mountaineer, which accounts for her realistic descriptions. Although Murfree is a specialist in this area, Dromgoole shows equal aptitude in reproducing not only the mountain characters and their situations, but also their dialect. It is difficult to make comparisons between these two authors because of the considerable gap in productivity, Dromgoole's nine stories as compared with Murfree's many stories and novels. Murfree combines accurate portraits of the mountaineer and his society with reasonably realistic speech patterns and not overly sentimental plots to capture the spirit of the mountains and their people. Her descriptions are unrivaled, resulting in a total effect that does justice to the mountaineer and his culture. Dromgoole maintains these high standards as well, but only for a short time; her mountain fiction began in 1890 and ended in 1904, with no mountain stories appearing between 1899 and 1903. Thus it is impossible to say whether her work would have maintained the high standards that Murfree exhibits. Because of productivity, accuracy of characterization, settings, dialect, and purpose, I must place Dromgoole somewhere between Murfree and Harris in importance, with Murfree being at the top of the scale.

Conversely to the above examples, there were other authors writing during this period who inaccurately presented the mountaineer, and, unintentionally, have done him an injustice by their ignorance and lack of understanding of mountain society. Since most readers will be less familiar with these authors than with Murfree or Harris, I mention two of them briefly as a means of comparison with Dromgoole.

Louise Regina Baker, an elusive figure because of lack of data, lived in Maryland, but wrote in Tennessee. There is no evidence of her having visited, much less lived, in Tennessee, and the manner in which she represents the mountaineer in her novel *Cis Martin* (1898), her only mountain work, lends strong support to this statement. She could have easily obtained general information about Tennessee and its people by reading earlier literature, such as Murfree's, but the insight gained only through experience in the mountains is seriously lacking. Baker consistently refers to the mountains as "the Tennessee mountains" and speaks of them as a hostile, foreign place — which indeed they were to many. The main characters in the novel are an upper-middle-class family who have experienced financial failure and have traveled to the mountains so that the father, an ex-professor of Greek and Latin, can try his fortune in the lumber business. The story is narrated by the oldest daughter, who is newly arrived from a finishing school in the East; her main goal is to publish a novel her father has written, and thereby rescue her family from the Tennessee mountains and return them to civilization, events which eventually do occur. If this plot is not preposterous enough. Baker gives an unflattering and highly inaccurate picture of the mountaineer. For example, one mountain woman gives her son away as a Christmas present, while at another point in the story some of the women ramble uninvited through a house, looking through dresser drawers, touching everything in sight, and generally behaving rudely. None of these actions is typical of the mountaineer and shows Baker's lack of experience with and knowledge of this people. Such examples appear throughout the book; however, her representation of mountain dialect, although superficial, is better than average. When placed beside such ignorant renderings, the works of Murfree and Dromgoole shine like novae.

Somewhat comparable with Baker is Sarah Barnwell Elliott, a Tennessean by adoption, having spent most of her adult life in Sewanee. Her novel, *The Durket Sperret* (1898), exhibits a sentimental plot with two-dimensional, stereotyped characters who are out of their element and who behave unrealistically. Elliott presents a high contrast by juxtaposing well-educated city dwellers and semi-literate mountain dwellers; the story revolves around a melodramatic plot — good mountain boy saves innocent mountain girl from the corrupting influences of both the evil villain and city life. The importance of

ping the moral principle, that is, good triumphing over evil, takes precedence over characterization. There does, at least, seem to be a purpose to this work, and Elliott's use of dialect is excessive but tolerable. Fortunately, both Murfree and Dromgoole can achieve purpose in their works as well as believable situations, speech, and characters.

As shown by these comparisons, Dromgoole is as good as the best in most respects, and better than others in all respects — her only challenger, as far as this author is concerned, being Murfree. Now that stereotyped characters have been defined and some of her contemporaries have been examined, a study of some of Dromgoole's experiments in mountain literature can now be presented. In the small collection of nine stories, one sees many suitable and interesting topics for discussion, with one that is unique, interesting, and surprisingly contemporary in her treatment of women. Only two of the stories do not have female characters, while two others include women who indirectly influence the male characters. In five of the nine stories, however, Dromgoole draws strong portraits of women who openly challenge not only their way of life, but sometimes their men. These portrayals, ranging from the fatalistic mountain matriarch to young, strong-willed, rebellious mountain girls, are definitely refreshing and make Dromgoole's works quite different from those of her contemporaries. I center on these latter five stories because these types of female heroines were not typically found in literature during this period, and especially not in the South. Women were usually "kept in their place," but Dromgoole, being a rather strong-willed, liberated female herself, decided to alter this image — in some of her literature at least. She apparently felt the need to show a side other than the more common docile, house-tending, child-bearing mountain women frequently seen in mountain literature of the 1890's.

The first of the stories to contain a prominent female character is "The War of the Roses," published in the *Boston Arena* in 1892. In this East Tennessee story, Dromgoole uses an actual historical event as a backdrop to her fictional tale, which presents an interesting portrait of a headstrong young girl. The conflict involves a common subject — politics. The title refers to the color of the roses one wears to show his political persuasion — red for Republican and white for Democrat; the plot is based loosely on the rivalry between Bob and Alf Taylor, two brothers who ran against each other for governor of Tennessee in the

late nineteenth century. The entire story takes place at a corn shucking which serves as a political rally for the almost exclusively Republican community. Denie Lynn and Eb Ford are a young "courtin' " couple, but politics disrupts their relationship when Eb wears the Republican red rose to the shucking, and Denie arrives wearing a white one. The community looks upon Denie as a radical, as well as a woman who obviously does not know her place, since she deliberately has defied her fiancé by wearing the white rose.

Both Eb and Denie are stubborn and believe strongly in their principles and their candidates. Eb, however, becomes frustrated with Denie and their political quarrel, his pride keeping him from forgiving her obstinacy. He makes a statement which was probably in the minds of all the men and women present: " 'Women ought ter keep out'n o' politics anyhow ... an' men hev got ter stand up fur the'rse'ves if they *be* men' . " (p. 486) Denie, however, is not the meek, submissive woman so often seen in mountain literature. She is equally as stubborn as Eb, but possesses a quiet resolution which gives her a sophisticated air throughout the story. Living up to her convictions, she says, " 'T'd ruther be the oneliest one ter wear her hones' colors ... es ter be the oneliest one not brave enough ter stan' by her principles' . " (p. 488) Clearly, Denie comes out the winner in the end, as Eb changes his mind and votes Democratic, presumably because Denie has persuaded him that her candidate is the better of the two men. Even though women had no right to vote yet, this young girl defies public sentiment and hostility, as well as the one she loves, to stand up for her rights and beliefs.

In 1892, Dromgoole published "The Leper of the Cumberlands," in the *Arena*, a story set in the valley of the Milksick Mountain in White County. The only character of any importance is Granny, and even though Dromgoole gives minimal description, the reader can clearly picture the white-haired, wrinkled, almost ageless, work-worn mountain matriarch who possesses a strength to match her years. No rebellious female is seen; rather Dromgoole pays tribute to the women of the mountains by showing what great strength, conviction, and compassion they convey.

Undulant fever, or milksick fever, apparently a common killer in rural Tennessee communities of this time, is the antagonist in the tale. Granny accepts the fever with a typical mountain fatalism by saying, " 'I air not questionin' of the Lord's doin's ... He made the milksick ez it

air, so I reckon it air all right, bein' ez I ain't never heard ez he were give ter makin' mistakes. I reckon' it air all right'." (p. 66)

Even though Granny and her family exhibit a sense of independence throughout the story, she goes out of her way to help her neighbors when they are sick or in need. According to one neighbor, Granny had "such a gentle way of carrying hope to afflicted hearts, such a natural way of making trouble seem less hard than it was." (p. 67) Although she was a tough old woman, Granny shows much sympathy and understanding through such simple acts as covering a small girl's grave with flowers so it would not look so bare. Granny and the family were poor monetarily, but it was her conviction that wealth was not the riches one should seek in life.

This story centers on Granny's belief in God and Fate. The community often tired of her fatalistic approaches to life and wondered if she would accept fate so readily when faced by disaster herself. Even though she loses her husband and grandchildren to the fever, Granny's strength prevails and her faith does not desert her. With the character of Granny, Dromgoole's mountain types reach a more realistic stage. Faith — in oneself and in higher powers — has thus far been an important feature of Dromgoole's heroines and will continue to be.

"Cinch," Dromgoole's third mountain story, was first published in the *Arena* in 1894. This novella is set in the mountains of what is present-day Polk County in lower East Tennessee. There are two male characters and one female — all of them sharing equal importance; however, the eventual conflicts arise over Isabel Stamps, the wife of Jerry Stamps, a semi-literate, rough, crude mountain man. The third character and cause of the problems is Bob Binder, a more literate, worldly man, who has been away from the mountains for eight years. Jerry treats Isabel badly, both physically and emotionally, and Binder fancies himself the rescuer, but Isabel is caught in the middle. She is very attracted to Binder, as he is to her. Isabel has a "cameo delicacy" and golden hair, but her figure is weary and drooping, the result of the hard life she leads. Admiring Binder's worldliness and good looks, she is flattered because he pays her the attention that she craves from her husband but does not get. In short, we are shown a clear picture of a mistreated mountain wife, who is overworked, unappreciated, naïve, lonely, as well as starving for attention. Isabel also shows Binder some bruises that are the result of Jerry's rough treat-



ment after he had come home drunk one night. Because of this physical brutality, Binder decides to steal Isabel from her husband, but she reveals that she is pregnant and feels that her place is with her husband, the father of her child. By the end of the story, Jerry is reformed by the birth of their baby. The reader is led to believe that this transformation is complete and permanent, but Binder is not as sure. During the story, Isabel goes through two separate stages of emotion; she wants to leave her husband and her confining way of life, but conscience will not allow her to overstep her role as wife and mother. This is her lot in life, and she calmly accepts it. Because of Jerry's reformation, this decision is easier for the reader to accept.

Dromgoole presents a common picture of the stereotyped mountain woman in "Cinch"; there is no rebellion except against inner desires. The extensive stereotyping used here suppresses the character and brings forth the symbolism — not of good triumphing over evil, but good becoming tainted and evil mellowing and becoming decent. So, as Dromgoole sometimes does, she has sacrificed strong characterizations for strong meaning.

The fourth tale is to be considered is "A Humble Advocate," published in the *Arena* in 1895. The events more than likely take place in the mountains of Sevier County, since the characters go down to Sevierville to vote. Dromgoole's most rebellious heroine is introduced in the character of Josephine Cary. Josephine is like Denie Lynn of "War of the Roses" in the way she stands up for her principles, but she is more like a stronger version of Isabel Stamps in "Cinch." Unlike Isabel, Josephine defies her husband, who remains like an unreformed Jerry Stamps. Dromgoole speaks out for women of the mountains whom she felt deserved better lives, but seldom ever achieved them — women always under the male dominated societal influences.

Josephine is described as having "small, labor-marked" hands and a dreary life, a "cat and dog existence," essentially being a servant to her husband and children (pp. 289-99). Her face was pleasant and showed "resolve, spirit, and a courage that death itself could not put to shame." (p. 291) At one point Josephine declares that she only stays with her husband because of the children and knows that it is useless to rebel against him. One day she hears that laws to give women the right to vote are being considered, and she decides to go into town on election day to investigate the situation. She is, of course, ridiculed by the other women for not keeping in her place, and by the

men for talking politics. Josephine stands up to the taunts well and makes this statement: " 'Some of you'uns'll live ter see the women o' the land cast'n o' their votes yet'. " (p. 314) This was a dramatic statement for Dromgoole to make in 1895. After Josephine's husband hears these remarks, he throws a bottle at her head and whips her publicly. She did not want the right to vote because she was a suffragette; she merely wanted some fairness and protection from men like her husband.

In "A Humble Advocate" Dromgoole again replaces objective characterizations with stereotypes, especially with her male characters. The emphasis here, however, is on the theme, which is the plight of the mountain women as women in general, and to facilitate this recognition of theme, the women are placed on pedestals and are fighting for equal rights, while the men are depicted in the worst possible light, as can be seen by these comments made to Josephine by a minor male character: " 'My wife gits all she air entitled to in *this* world ... she hev got the right to milk the cow, an' cook the victuals, ter rise up an' set down. What more mortal critter air wantin' for, air too much for Jeff Bynum ter say'. " (p. 304) Certainly there were such men present in mountain society, and Dromgoole does get her points across, but she does little to the male mountaineer image in general. Unfortunately, this sort of stereotyping was all too frequent in regional fiction of this time; for example, Harris's Sut Lovingood and Murfree's Mrs. Ike Peel and Mrs. Isaac Boker, Rufus Chadd and Hi Bates, and Celia Shaw and Cynthia Ware. Not all of these are harmful stereotypes, but by overgeneralizing authors do not project accurate pictures of any society.

"Tappine," the final piece I examine, never appeared in the *Arena*, but did appear in "*Cinch*" and *Other Stories* in 1898. With this story Dromgoole offers a testimonial and perhaps a tribute to woman's great inner strength, which ironically leads to disaster in Tappine's case. Beersheba Springs in Grundy County, a popular resort area in the late 1800's, is the setting. Dromgoole maintained a summer home in nearby Estill Springs and probably was familiar with the hills she speaks of in this story. The main character, Tappine, a young mountain girl, serves as a guide for Mrs. Ennerly, a summer resident

who is sophisticated and wise. Dromgoole describes Tappine as "a slight, frail figure, full of lissome grace ... yet despite her youth there was that about her ... that bore evidence of strength which might, under stress of necessity, leap into life." (pp. 322-23)

The conflicts result from a love triangle in which Tappine rejects the love of a boy named Ben, while in turn she is rejected by another boy named Jeff. Tappine swears undying love to the mountain boy Jeff, who is not worthy of her love. Various persons warn Tappine about Jeff, and Mrs. Ennerly goes so far as to suggest that Ben would make a much better husband, but Tappine disregards the advice by saying, " 'A woman can't help who she loves and she can't allus love as she knows ter be wise an' right'. " (p. 335) The truth of this statement makes both the reader and Mrs. Ennerly realize Tappine's wisdom beyond her years. At the close of the tale, Tappine is dead because of her love for the ne'er-to-do-well Jeff. Jeff kills a man in a fight, and while Tappine is on her way to warn him of the posse, a shot is fired which scares her horse, causing both horse and rider to plunge off a cliff to their deaths. Ironically, it is implied that the shot was fired by Jeff.

The character of Tappine is not stereotyped; she is strong-willed, following her heart and her principles, although the reader may condemn her for her feelings and actions. The tragedy of her death sentimentalizes the story, but reinforces the characterizations.

In these five stories, a good cross-section of Dromgoole's work is evident; she showed sensitivity as well as versatility in dealing with the mountaineer, and even though much of her work is overromanticized and sentimentalized, one must keep in mind her reading public of the time and their limited knowledge of the mountains. They probably would not have had much patience with realistic portraits of mountain life. Dromgoole does no great harm to the mountaineer as others have; what stereotypes she uses are limited (Isabel Stamps, Ike Cary), and she employs enough variety to make her characters seem realistic. Her women begin as rather weak, but stubborn figures (Denie Lynn and Isabel Stamps) and end as portraits of feminine strength and rebellion (Granny, Josephine Cary, and Tappine). They symbolize important ideas. For example, Josephine Cary becomes the spokeswoman for women's rights, and Tappine represents an inner strength which transcends the boundaries of death. As compared with other authors who wrote mountain fiction in the late nineteenth cen-

tury, Dromgoole's representations of the mountain women were certainly ahead of her time. We must recognize that this lady with a man's name from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, wrote mountain fiction that stands up with that of the best of her contemporaries.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Conversations With Miss Dromgoole," *The Coming Age*, 1(1899), 614.

<sup>2</sup> The anthologies and the mountain stories they contain are "*The Heart of Old Hickory*" and *Other Stories* (Boston, 1895): "Fiddling His Way to Fame" (1890) and "Ole Logan's Courtship" (1894); "*Cinch*" and *other Stories* (Boston, 1898): "Cinch" (1894), "The Leper of the Cumberland" (1892), "A Humble Advocate" (1895), and "Tappine" (1898). The three stories never anthologized are "The War of the Roses" [*The Arena*, 5(1892)], "The Herb Doctor" [*The Arena*, 17(1897)], and "The Light of Liberty" [*The Arena*, 31(1904)]. All further references to Dromgoole's stories will be placed within the text from the sources above.